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PROMOTION, PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AT NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN: HUMAN RIGHTS AND YOUTH

Written statement submitted by the International Federation Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[5 July 1991]

STREET CHILDREN

1. In the world today, 40,000 children under five years of age die every day from ordinary malnutrition and disease, 150 million live on with ill-health and poor growth and 100 million 6 to 11-year-olds do not attend school. The international organizations are trying to deal with this "quiet catastrophe" 1/ facing them but they have come to realize that the children themselves are looking for the means to live and survive which neither adults nor society can provide. The social phenomenon of street children has therefore taken on an

unprecedented dimension. It is a worldwide problem and can be found even in States, such as Argentina, where only a few years ago, it did not exist. According to UNICEF, an estimated 30 million children live on city streets. 2/ Other estimates are even higher.

2. It is difficult to imagine the suffering of these children, some of them very young, cast out onto the fringes of the adult world. They are robbed of their childhood and their most fundamental rights and forced to "scrounge" for survival and do odd jobs, under conditions of virtual slavery. For them, there is no dignity, security, affection or education, all things which are the due and right of every child. Consequently, they run the risk of sinking into delinquency, drugs and prostitution and they receive no health care if they fall ill.

3. There are many street children in the large metropolises of Africa. One African associate says that the phenomenon is due to several factors:

the urban explosion;

the attraction of the city;

the economic situation;

failure at school;

the situation of families.

4. Until a few years ago, the African village was still a cohesive force and a place where the elders were respected and adults were many. Today many have left the villages, particularly because of the fascination of modern cities like Abidjan. Many people cherish the dream of carving out a place for themselves in modern society but they have not yet mastered all the rules of the game. They are therefore easily marginalized, shut out from society at all levels and the village can no longer provide an alternative for those cast out by the big cities. Consequently, there is a breakdown of the fabric of the family.

5. Because of the difficult situation that prevails in Africa today, most urban households have an extremely precarious existence. Raising a child has now become too heavy a burden for them. The street children are therefore nearly always from those disadvantaged families which very often emigrated to the city in the hope of finding a better life. In addition, there are those children who failed in school, where the education infrastructure is unable to keep pace with demographic growth. As a result, there is a very rigid selection process which screens out the most disadvantaged children.

6. The family situation is obviously the determining factor which forces a child to live on the street. Here again, there is the difficulty of adapting to modern life. In many cases parents have to spend the bulk of their time trying to gain a livelihood and do not have the necessary time to heed the difficulties of their often numerous children. Parents may also be disarmed by the fact - a feature of modern life - that their authority over their children is undermined. The breakup of the family and the growing number of divorces are also factors which push the child out into the street. The death

of the parents and the lack of orphanages or other support structures also contribute to this phenomenon. An African associate was told by one child: "I ended up on the street because my father remarried and my stepmother did not want me. I used to fight with her children and then she would beat me, so now I am sleeping on cardboard".

7. The young people themselves are quite resourceful in coping with this difficult situation. With the energy that is characteristic of the young, they try to find a way out by working at menial jobs in the informal sector, for example:

minding cars;

carrying luggage;

selling small items, newspapers, drinks;

scaling fish.

These small jobs help to keep them alive and improve their image in society, which is often very negative. Their earnings also help to provide financial support for the families. It is worth noting that social workers dealing with street children often view the fact that they work not as a problem but as a healthy and intelligent reaction to a situation which would otherwise be hopeless.

8. In Mali, there is currently a runaway increase in population in Bamako which has led to the presence of very large families with low incomes. The increasingly urban character of Bamako is alien to the population which comes from the countryside, often driven from their villages by drought. Modern living has also created a new pattern of society and the children who are born in this mixed society are thoroughly confused. In addition to the children from rural areas who come to Bamako, there are children who are born in the city in very poor families and the majority of them do not attend school. Unemployment had forced them onto the streets.

9. In Cape Town, in South Africa, many street children have maintained some contact with their families. In order to escape loneliness and to protect themselves, they live in gangs and adopt the name of the place where they assemble. These children earn a living by performing menial jobs or by stealing, begging or prostitution. In order to endure this existence, three quarters of them take drugs. The police often arrest and imprison them. Children in that situation cannot return to school any more because they have lost their ability to concentrate. Measures for their gradual reintegration are needed.

10. In Kenya, the street children vary in age. In Nairobi, they range from 5 to 15 years and fall into three categories:

- children with parents or relatives who could take care of them;

- children living in gangs who have no ties to the community;

- children who are completely alone.

These children are in fact excluded from the schools because they do not have the birth certificate needed for admission. Kenyan law offers alternatives to those who lack this certificate but they are complicated and therefore out of the reach of the street children. Furthermore, the school items required are too costly for poor families or for children living alone.

11. Adults, society, the humanitarian organizations and governments must obviously try to remedy the situation of these street children who have been deprived of their childhood and they must help them to become reintegrated into society. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that "States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development". Article 28 recognizes the right of the child to education. But in order to overcome a problem of such magnitude, governmental and non-governmental bodies must work together.

12. Many examples of projects in Africa which have proved effective show that the problem of street children is not insoluble. A number of remedial measures can be applied quickly and cheaply. In every case, emphasis must be placed on reincorporating the young people into their native environment, on vocational training, on the creation of a really adapted welfare service, on negotiations with the police and justice authorities to ensure respect for and protection of these children and on recognition of their inalienable dignity.

13. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the projects undertaken to assist the street children in Abidjan and in Bouaké have the following key points:

- identification of the children;
- reincorporation into the family if possible and support for the families;
- vocational training and placement;
- health care;
- the reintegration into society of young people who leave prison.

14. In East Africa one NGO has set up a project to provide health care as well as private classes for street children, to help them to make up the years of schooling they have missed. The families of the children may be granted a loan and given training that will enable them to find remunerative work. Thirty-six of the 39 families who have benefited under this project are now earning enough to live on and many of the 122 children involved have returned to school.

15. In conclusion, the International Federation Terre des Hommes wishes to recommend to the Sub-Commission that it invite all the States concerned:

(a) To study the causes of the phenomenon with the assistance of social workers and all persons working in this field, locally, regionally, or internationally, with a view to the adoption of appropriate preventive measures;

(b) To recognize the value of the work being done by non-governmental organizations in assisting street children and to support them by all appropriate means;

(c) To take steps to correct the image of the street children in public opinion and to avoid presenting them either as passive victims or as irredeemable delinquents;

(d) As far as possible to encourage the unity and values of the family unit;

(e) To develop structures which will enable street children and working children to receive informal education adapted to their needs.

Notes

1/ UNICEF, The State of the World's Children 1991, p. 1.

2/ Ibid., p. 42.